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ABSTRACT

In this report the New York State Personnel and Guidance Association presents its response to the Report of the New York State Office of Education Performance Review (OEPR) entitled An Evaluation of the Role and Functions of the Guidance Counselor. The OEPR report was published in September 1974. The OEPR undertook the study to determine the actual role and functions of school counselors and the effectiveness of the services provided by school counselors across New York State. Findings were based upon questionnaires and interviews. The OEPR reports attempt to summarize the findings, and provide recommendations for the improvement of guidance services. The primary purposes of this Position Paper are: (1) to make counselors aware of the constructive aspects of the report, as well as its unsatisfactory aspects; (2) to enable counselors to respond effectively to the questions of administrators and school board members relative to the content of the report and the value of the recommendations; and (3) to assist counselors to communicate more adequately and cooperate with school board members and administrators in implementing the constructive aspects of the report. (Author)

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NEW YORK STATE PERSONNEL AND GUIDANCE ASSOCIATION

RESPONSE TO THE REPORT,

EVALUATION OF THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE GUIDANCE COUNSELOR,

PRODUCED BY THE NEW YORK STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION PERFORMANCE REVIEW

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March, 1975

New York State Personnel and Guidance Association

Richardson Hall, Room 271

135 Western Avenue

Albany, New York 12203

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In this report the New York State Personnel and Guidance Association presents its response to the Report of the New York State Office of Education Performance Review (OEPR) entitled An Evaluation of the Role and Functions of the Guidance Counselor. The OEPR report, under the general direction of Daniel Klepak, was published in September 1974 as one of a series of studies undertaken by the OEPR.

Briefly, the OEPR undertook the study to determine:

1. The actual role and functions of school counselors, and

2. The effectiveness of the services provided by school counselors across New York State.

The findings were based primarily upon a 23-item questionnaire which was completed by 423 counselors. Supplemental questionnaires were completed by 227 students (31% Seniors, 35% Juniors, 34% Sophomores) and 292 parents. In addition a number of administrators, teachers, counselors, parents and students were interviewed. Based on the data obtained from these questionnaires and interviews, OEPR published a report which attempted to summarize the most significant findings, and provide recommendations for the improvement of guidance services.

The primary purposes of this NYSPGA Position Paper are:

1. To make counselors aware of the constructive aspects of the report, as well as its unsatisfactory aspects;

2. To enable counselors to respond effectively to the questions of administrators and school board members relative to the content of the report and the value of the recommendations;

3. To assist counselors to communicate more adequately and cooperate with school board members and administrators in implementing the constructive aspects of the report.

CONSTRUCTIVE ASPECTS OF THE REPORT:

The OEPR indicated that more meaningful guidance services could be available if several problem areas were dealt with by school district boards of education.

1. Elementary School Counselors: More school counselors should be employed at the elementary level. "Many experts feel that greater priority should be given to the early detection and prevention of problems, rather than concentration on the expensive and often ineffectual processes of correction after problems arise" (p. 30).

2. Guidance Goals: Guidance Program Objectives, which are responsive to local needs, should be established in all schools (p. 27).

3. Non-Counseling Duties: "Take measures to assure that counselors are not spending an inordinate amount of time in such activities such as clerical work,

routine administrative duties, and general 'red tape' " (p. 27). It was further indicated that such activities were wasteful of professional counseling skills. In his cover letter to the Superintendents which accompanied the OEPR report, Mr. Klepak again strongly encouraged this recommendation. It is the same one which local, state and national professional counselor organizations have consistently and firmly advocated.

4. Counselor Load: The report recommended that a counselor-student ratio be established (p. 30). "Ratio" was referred to as both "staffing ratio" and "staffing patterns." It should be emphasized, however, that adequate staffing ratios are closely related to the scope of the counselor's role. According to the report, counselors indicated that a reduced counselor-student ratio would lead to expansion of the following services:

a. Career education programs
b. Group counseling
c. Activities with parents
d. Elementary school guidance programs
e. Work-study programs
f. Working with teachers on curriculum.

5. Evaluation: Effective evaluation should be conducted annually and should include input and feedback from parents and students, as well as from teachers and administrators (p. 29).

UNSATISFACTORY ASPECTS OF THE REPORT:

While counselors have been pressing for the preceding recommendations, many points in the report are erroneous, and others indicate a lack of awareness of the proper role of the counselor on the part of the researchers of the Office of Education Performance Review. Among these unsatisfactory aspects are the following:

1. The report utilized the original State Education Law which served as the basis for evaluating guidance services. Consequently, attention was focused primarily upon the educational and vocational assistance provided by school counselors. This is too narrow a view of the field of counseling, inasmuch as the role of the counselor has grown and evolved since the original statement of the Law. Counselors would find it unconscionable to ignore certain problems of students in the social, personal and behavioral realms. The developmental needs of students at each grade level should also be considered important. The exclusion of questions focusing on other than educational and vocational services indicates that the developers of the questionnaires did not understand the role of the counselor.

2. Most of the results were presented in a negative fashion, e.g., the report indicated that 40% of the parents and students were dissatisfied, whereas it could with the same data have stated that 60% were definitely satisfied with the work of the counselors. Furthermore, the summary findings and conclusions on Pages i - iv reported exclusively the negative results, and totally excluded findings which were favorable to counselors. If the reported had inclined toward pointing out positive results, it would have revealed that:

a. Most of the parents (80%) felt that counselors were available to them for consultation.

b. Most of the parents (70%) stated positive descriptions of counselors, such as "helpful, interested and understanding."

c. Fifty-six percent of the students replied affirmatively when asked, "Have your guidance counselors been as helpful as you think they should be?"

3. In the report, questions were not properly worded or designed; hence the resultant data could be misconstrued. For example, it is indicated that only 8% of the students said the counselor assisted them with finances; 7% said the counselor secured employment for them; 19% said the counselor assisted them with college acceptance. Questions should, therefore, be raised since this would for the most part not even be an appropriate question for the sophomores in the study. In the same section it should be asked whether those students were expected to have recurring problems, or had they already been solved in a previous year. For example, a student who had secured a job, would not have answered in the affirmative each year to the question: "Did your counselor help you this year to get a job?" The third alternative, viz. "Does not apply" is rather nebulous throughout the report. It might be construed to mean, "I did not receive this service," or "This service is not offered," or "I did not need this service." Thus both positive and negative conclusions attach to the response where this alternative has been selected.

4. The report concluded that students had not been helped by their counselor because "counselors had not substantially altered their course of action" (p. 23). This conclusion appears erroneous because altering a student's course of action is not normally considered to be part of the counselor's role. Frequently, the counselor serves as a sounding-board, a reinforcement or support for the students' decisions, and often as a source of information prior to decision-making. Counselors further assist students to explore various options available and the consequences and implications of them.

5. The report indicated that many guidance goals were measurable, but the criteria itemized were not related to any particular goal of either the guidance program or of an individual student. The report failed to indicate what particular guidance program goals or student-based outcomes were assessed, for example, by means of the following:

a. "A reduction in the number of drop-outs".
b. "A general improvement in the scholastic achievement of the school".

6. The report indicated in a rather negative sense that parents felt that they had more contact with teachers than with counselors. This criticism appears to be irrelevant because it is understandable that parents are likely to see more teachers since there are many more teachers than counselors. Also, one would presume that parents should have more contact with the class room teacher, e.g. at parents' nights, PTA meetings, etc., because of numerous social and educational programs within the classroom setting.

QUESTIONS OF METHODOLOGY:

1. One of NYSPGA's local chapters, the Long Island Personnel and Guidance Association, has made repeated requests, but the OEPR has refused to submit a copy of the questionnaires and instruments which were used.

2. No access to the final results (and these are public records) has been gained, after repeated requests.

3. No presentation was made of students' responses from elementary or middle schools, although counselors were questioned from those schools. This is an invalid reporting procedure.

4. An analysis of the OEPR report by Daisy Shaw, president of New York City Personnel and Guidance Association, found that the report repeatedly displayed faulty research methods including inadequate sampling, poorly constructed questionnaires, lack of data validation, statistical errors, internal contradictions in analysis of data and misinterpretation of findings.

5. An accurate picture of the parents interviewed was not possible because the grade-level of their child was not indicated in the data provided by the report. Furthermore, the parents who were surveyed were not the parents of the children surveyed. Therefore, there is no consistency in the evaluation.

6. Questionnaires were not completed by either administrators or teachers. Data from these personnel would probably have given a more comprehensive picture of counselor effectiveness.

7. The conclusions or implications derived from the data collected relative to the students often appeared to be misinterpreted or inappropriate. Furthermore, the data collected, and the concluding statements had implications for the counselor's role which were often questionable as to their appropriateness. For example:

a. Nineteen percent of the students found their counselor helpful in "college acceptance".

The phrase "college acceptance" typically is not considered to be the counselor's major role in assisting the student with decisions relative to attending college. There are many variables involved in the college admissions process. The counselor's involvement and assistance does not revolve primarily around "college acceptance", nor is it at all construed to be a role in which the counselor acts as advocate for the student. Counselors view their role as including emphasis upon developing student self-awareness, educational-awareness and career-awareness so that adequate decisions relative to college can be made by students.

b. Seven percent of the students found the counselor helpful in securing employment.

This function is often not part of a counselor's job description. In addition the employment obtained was not differentiated as to full-time or part-time work, and this further confuses the results.

c. Six percent of the students found the counselor helpful in obtaining entry into a "work study" program.

Such assistance by counselors is usually restricted to a very specific and limited group of students. Such programs are not meant to serve the majority of students.

d. Four percent of the students found the counselor helpful in making referrals to a community service for a special problem.

Once again, the percentage of students is low because a very small percent of students is likely to need assistance for a special problem through a community service.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Despite the often clumsy data gathering, the misinterpretations and errors in the findings, the negative outlook, and the omissions of key data, OEPR came forward with a set of recommended actions which in the main are supported by NYSPGA. In that spirit, we now proceed to implementing those recommendations.

The OEPR urged district boards of education to promptly carry out several recommendations relative to school counselors and the services they provide. In order for the recommendations to be most effectively accomplished it seems wise to further stress to school boards that they should actively involve the school counselors and local counselor professional organizations to assist in these endeavors. Through this multilateral effort to accomplish common goals, a great deal of constructive change and improved communication will also result.

The NYSPGA makes the following suggestions to school counselors for implementing those recommendations.

1. Develop clear program objectives responsive to local needs and define the role and functions of the guidance counselors. Counselors should be very active in this area and request meetings with board members to discuss these topics. The New York School Counselor Association has developed a Handbook on Public Relations which gives ideas on how the role of the counselor might be presented to school boards at their regular meetings and this has proved effective and enlightening for all concerned.

In a time of economic squeeze, counselors should focus upon programs which will benefit the students. Similarly, the program objectives should be evaluated in terms of concrete benefits to the student.

2. "Take measures to assure that counselors are not spending an inordinate amount of time in such activities as clerical work, routine administrative duties and general 'red tape'." It should be noted that some counselors in the past have assumed duties which were not related to their praticular skills or job description. Counselors should seize the opportunity offered by these OEPR recommendations to review their school activities, develop appropriate job descriptions and counselor role descriptions, and present these to the school boards. Many of the clerical and

routine administrative duties which they perform could and should be done by other members of the school staff, with the consequence that counselors would have more time to serve the needs of the students, teachers and the parents in accordance with their professional skills.

3. "Assure that wider use is made of students as peer counselors and volunteers as vocational counselors in support and extension of existing staffs". While the recommendation by the OEPR encourages peer counseling, it is not necessarily appropriate for every school. Furthermore the technique of peer counseling in dealing with certain problems has not been verified sufficiently by adequate research. It should be used cautiously within the framework of experimentation. Unless school boards, administrators and staff have a strong commitment to the concept of peer counseling, and adequately trained supervisors are provided, peer counseling will not be successful.

4. "Assure that guidance departments make full use of community resources". The OEPR suggests that counselors make greater use of the voluntary, religious and governmental agencies which customarily parallel certain services which are provided by the counselor. If this recommendation is to be followed, school boards must provide the counselors with time to visit those agencies, and to work along with them. Counselors could be employed during the summer, as well, to coordinate their district's activities with those agencies.

5. "Involve parents, teachers and students in an annual review of guidance program effectiveness". Counselors could begin the year by presenting their objectives to the school administrators for agreement. Once the agreement is made, there is clear direction for the guidance department for that year. The value of this is that the objectives of the counselor are understood more clearly, and the counselor would not get bogged down in activities which are not a part of his/her role.

A very effective tool which the counselors should use is the Professional Advancement Team (PAT) which has been established through the NYSPGA. The PAT makes use of input from counselors, administrators, teachers, students and parents to assess the Guidance Program as seen in light of the philosophy of the guidance department and school district. Counselors should consult with their local chapter of the NYSPGA for additional information concerning the availability of Professional Advancement Teams for visitation.

CONCLUSION:

The Office of Education Performance Review is no longer in existence. The sensationalism which OEPR tried to generate in the public press with regard to the school counselor report lasted about two days. But counselors can profit from the lingering effects of OEPR if they will concertedly capitalize on its recommendations, as we have suggested above.

Two other timely and incisive response/analyses of the OEPR report have been produced, and we commend them highly to our membership. One was developed by the Long Island Personnel and Guidance Association (its president is Ben Angel, Supervisor of Guidance, Levittown Public Schools, Levittown, New York 11756). The LIPGA paper received warm agreement from Education Commissioner Nyquist. The other was prepared for the New York City Personnel and Guidance Association by its president, Daisy K. Shaw (NYC Board of Education, 110 Livingston Avenue, Brooklyn, New York 11201). In addition to its perceptive general analysis, the paper draws specific implications for guidance in New York City.